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## ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the 48 responses from faculty and various groups and institutions to a block transfer discussion paper. The Block Transfer Project grew out of statements in Charting a New Course that assigned to the British Columbia (BC) Council on Admission and Transfer the responsibility for implementing a system of block transfer for the BC postsecondary system. The Council decided to launch an investigation into what block transfer might mean in the context of arts and science degrees, and to determine whether precedents for the application of block transfer principles in arts and sciences existed in other jurisdictions. Twenty-four respondents answered that block transfer should "supplement" the current course to course transfer system. Nineteen respondents preferred Descriptive Pathways model, and fifteen respondents indicated support for Flexible Pre-Major model. Twenty-two respondents indicated that legislation was either unthinkable or unworkable for implementing block transfer. One of the frequent themes that emerges from an examination of responses is that articulation committees perform a valuable function. Some of the underlying issues that are discernable in responses are as follows: faculty autonomy in the current structure of the transfer system; institutional autonomy versus system issues; and the evolution of the new receiving institutions. Appendices include a list of respondents and respondents corresponding to questions. (JA)

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BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON

SERVING BC'S  
EDUCATION SYSTEM

ADMISSIONS &amp; TRANSFER

# THE BLOCK TRANSFER PROJECT

## CONSULTATION AND RESPONSE

Compiled and Analyzed  
for the  
B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer

by

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December 1997

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## CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Block Transfer Project grew out of statements in *Charting a New Course* that assigned to the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer the responsibility for implementing a system of block transfer for the BC post-secondary system. The statements in the Strategic Plan appeared to indicate that block transfer should replace our current course to course transfer system. Concerned that insufficient information was available on this topic, and that no clear definition of block transfer was given in the Plan, the Council decided to launch an investigation into what block transfer might mean in the context of arts and science degrees, and to determine whether precedents for the application of block transfer principles in arts and sciences existed in other jurisdictions.

The first step was the formulation of a workplan approved by Council, and the establishment of a Block Transfer Committee to advise us. I then conducted research in the transfer literature to identify models or precedents which might be useful, as well as an analysis of the current application of block transfer to professional and applied programs in B.C. I presented these findings at a February 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of Articulation Chairs and Liaison Administrators and asked participants to advise us on next steps. Participants supported ongoing investigation into block transfer, and several points emerged from group discussions, including:

- Block Transfer is not suitable for all situations and is not a panacea
- Block Transfer should supplement not replace the current system
- There are resource implications for any system innovations
- Whatever we do should give students more choice
- Most students transfer with less than two year's of credit; investigate a 30 credit transfer program
- The main problem is not transfer but all the institutions having different requirements
- Interest in a General Education Core Curriculum

During the spring I made a series of presentations to articulation committees on the topic of block transfer, and wrote *Block Transfer: Issues and Options*, which was circulated throughout the post-secondary system. This paper received much critical input and advice from the Block Transfer Committee.

Consultation was stepped up in the fall. During this period I conducted seminars, or made presentations on twelve occasions. This included meeting with SIOC, Deans' groups, CoEdCo, and an all day session with the CFS (with Frank Gelin). By the end of October we had received 48 responses to the block transfer discussion paper. We held an all day Forum on October 31, where we outlined the nature of responses we had received, and asked participants to evaluate those responses. More detail on this Forum is presented on page 18.

I have based my analysis presented in this paper on the written submissions to the block transfer discussion paper as well as the comments of the October Forum participants. However, some of it is also informed by the reading I have done, or by comments of individuals at the various presentations I have made. The whole consultation process cannot help but create impressions and sow seeds of ideas that become inextricably woven into the fabric of a report such as this.

In a highly diversified system such as ours, it is difficult to feel confident that one has sought and heard the opinion of all stakeholders or interested groups. Given that, I believe that we have received, in written submissions and forum and seminar comments, an exceptionally representative response from the BC post-secondary system. We are unlikely to get any better or more reliable collection of the opinions of system members than this process has yielded.

## RESPONSES TO BLOCK TRANSFER DISCUSSION PAPER

BCCAT received **51** submissions in response to the Block Transfer paper. **Three** responses were not “counted” in this analysis as one was from outside BC, one was anonymous, and one was by telephone and difficult to assess. Therefore, quantifiable responses numbered **48**. Not all respondents addressed the questions directly, so responses to individual questions as given in the following pages do not add up to **48**.

In an analysis such as this, a number of difficulties arise when one attempts to quantify or reflect the tenor of responses. Firstly, not everyone answered the questions. For those who did, in some cases answers were explicit, in others they were clearly intended. In some the answers were implicit, or indirect. Many respondents chose not to deal directly with the questions in favour of more general discussion about our transfer or our post-secondary system. Some proposed alternative models to those outlined in the paper. Some addressed only those aspects of transfer that related to their particular interest.

Secondly, even where a respondent addressed the questions directly, it could be difficult to know exactly where he/she/they “stood.” How, for example, should one interpret a response that says, “We reject block transfer and recommend instead that BCCAT improve the system by implementing Model 4”? In some cases, responses were worded so diplomatically, with the respondent taking care to be balanced, fair and objective, that it was difficult to pin down exact opinions. Perhaps this is a reflection of the complexity of the issues, or of the desire of respondents to be thoughtful and conservative in their directives, since any changes to a well-established system have to be carefully weighed.

Thirdly, several respondents pointed out that the whole concept of block transfer does not “fit” easily into an academic context, and that any one of the models outlined in the paper could in fact be implemented (if the will to do so existed) within the boundaries of our current course to course system. In other words, people who may be interested in improving the system are still reluctant to engage in discussions that carry the implication of radical change to a well-established structure. Hence the ambivalent nature of some submissions.

I have read each submission carefully several times and have tried to reflect the wishes of respondents in as unbiased a way as possible. Some responses, however, may be open to a number of interpretations and I have used my own judgment in my analysis of these submissions. Original responses are available for the detailed review of members of Council should they wish to delve deeper into the subject or to make their own interpretations of what opinions were expressed on issues of block transfer.

While it was not feasible to design a weighting system for quantifying the responses to the questions, I have tried to indicate where answers came from, so that readers can judge

if responses are reflective of representative groups or of isolated individuals. In outlining the themes, however, group responses were weighted more heavily than individual ones.

Responses came:

- 9 from individuals (faculty members, counselors, independent observers)
- 12 from representative groups, including
  - faculty associations/unions (e.g. CIEA, CUFA, CAAE)
  - sector committees such as SIOC, TUPC
  - CCTT
  - CFS
  - articulation committees
- 30 from institutions, including
  - Education Councils, Senate or Senate Committees
  - departments
  - Presidents or Vice Presidents on behalf of the institution

Most institutions in BC responded, as well as many groups representing faculty, students and educational administrators.

See Appendix A (page 23) for a detailed list of respondents.

## A. THE QUESTIONS

### Q. Should we develop a block transfer system for arts and science degrees in British Columbia?

14 respondents answered **no** to this question. Of these:

- 7 responses came from university-based respondents
- 6 were from university colleges, and
- 1 was from an individual college instructor.

However, **of these 14:**

- 5 indicated no support for any changes to the current system
- 9 indicated approval for **improvements to the current system**, some of which involved endorsement of one or more of the models as outlined in the paper.

25 respondents answered **yes**. Respondents were groups or individuals based in or related to:

- |                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| • universities                | 3 |
| • university colleges         | 2 |
| • institutes                  | 3 |
| • post-secondary system group | 5 |
| • colleges                    | 9 |
| • articulation committees     | 1 |
| • independent observers       | 2 |

However, **of these 25:**

- 7 respondents **qualified** their “yes” with “if all agree” or “if appropriate to the discipline”, while
- 4 indicated agreement only if block transfer was **limited to certain circumstances**.

### Q. Should block transfer supplement or replace our current course to course transfer system?

3 respondents answered **replace** to this question.

- 1 respondent (CIEA) answered phase in change, to **eventually replace**
- 1 response came from a university-college (KUC)
- 1 response came from an individual counselor at an institute,

24 respondents answered **supplement**. Responses were grouped as follows:

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| • university related  | 6 |
| • university-colleges | 4 |

- institute related 1
- post-secondary system 3
- colleges 7
- articulation committees 1
- individuals 2

Of these 24:

- 5 approved “continued discussion” on some of the models as **incremental improvements to the current system**, rather than as “new” block transfer models.

**Q. Which model or models of block transfer (ranked in order of preference) are most feasible for our British Columbia context?**

Very few respondents actually ranked the models. Therefore I have indicated the number of respondents who indicated support for or opposition to each model, together with other relevant data.

#### ***Model 1: System Wide Transfer***

11 respondents indicated support for this model. Of these:

- 5 respondents appeared to identify this model as their **preferred course of action**, (CIEA, CFS, 2 U-C depts, 1 college dept.)
- 6 expressed **support for the general principles** underlying the model, (i.e., that credit taken at any institution in the public system should be acceptable for credit at all other institutions) but had reservations regarding its feasibility. They suggested it become a fundamental goal of the system. (1 university, Deans, 2 individual, 2 U-C)

3 respondents indicated that this model was not acceptable. All 3 were university-based.

#### ***Model 2: General Education Core Curriculum***

6 respondents indicated support for this model.

4 respondents indicated that this model was not acceptable (CFS, SFU, CUFA) or only had very limited applicability (UNBC).

#### ***Model 3: Standardized Pre-Major***

3 respondents indicated support for this model.

2 respondents indicated reservations (CFS) or that this model was not acceptable (SFU).

#### ***Model 4: Flexible Pre-Major***

15 respondents indicated support for this model.

#### ***Model 5: Learning Outcomes***

12 respondents indicated support for this model. Of these:

- 5 indicated this model as their **preferred course of action**
- 7 indicated **support in principle**, but either expressed **doubt** about the system's ability to incorporate this approach in the short term, or about the desirability of utilizing outcomes as a vehicle for transfer rather than for curricular or instructional improvement

7 respondents indicated opposition to or reservations about this model. Of these,

- 3 referred to **opposition in principle** to this model.
- 4 referred to **lack of system-wide experience/expertise**.

#### ***Model 6: Descriptive Pathways***

19 respondents preferred this model. Of these:

- 4 indicated that this is a worthwhile activity that we should be encouraging whether we move forward with block transfer initiatives or not.

1 respondent indicated that this model was not acceptable (CFS)

**Q. Should block transfer be implemented through legislation, or only through voluntary agreement by participating institutions?**

Only 2 (individual) respondents preferred the legislative option.

22 respondents indicated that legislation was either unthinkable or unworkable. Of these:

- 6 indicated legislation could be viewed as a "last resort" if all other avenues had been exhausted.

#### **Other Models**

In addition to the responses above, two responses (UBC, TUPC/VPAC) indicated support for utilizing the associate degree as a vehicle for block transfer. (Note that during the course of this consultation UNBC Senate approved block transfer for associate degrees.) One individual advocated a "hybrid" model of course by course transfer for the major, combined with block transfer of all "general" credit.

**Q. What improvements, if any, would you suggest to our current system of credit transfer?**

Several respondents had ideas or suggestions for improvements to the current system. These included support for improvements to advising and the provision of advising tools such as Electronic Data Interchange systems, to speed up and automate the transfer process; a clearly defined transfer appeals process and a transfer liaison person at all institutions; the implementation of common transfer standards for AP and IB courses; more interchange and connections between advisors; more support for articulation committees; and a common course numbering system. One respondent suggested listing all courses offered by sending institutions in the transfer guide, so that students would be clear about what did *not* receive transfer credit. The CFS response indicated the need to examine prerequisites which “at times seem arbitrary”, and recommended that BCCAT develop a process to allow for transfer of PLA credit on par with other credit.

See Appendix B (page 24) for a list of respondents corresponding to each question.

## B. THE THEMES

Three types of themes emerge from an examination of responses.

1. **Major Theme or Consensus:** This is defined as a theme which is explicit or clearly intended in a majority of responses.
2. **Frequent Theme:** Defined as a theme that is explicit or clearly intended in eight or more responses, but not in a majority. Responses fit this definition if they occurred particularly in official, representative responses such as those from institutions or representative groups, rather than from individuals.
3. **Minor Theme:** Defined as a theme that is explicit or clearly intended in two or more but fewer than eight responses, or expressed mainly in the responses of individuals rather than representative groups.

In the course of consultations I held seminars and made presentations on block transfer. I have used a few direct quotes from participants at those seminars, but have not "counted" any informal verbal responses in identifying the themes.

### 1. MAJOR THEME/CONSENSUS

**Although improvement is needed, the current course by course transfer system is essentially sound**

Support for the current transfer system was expressed by 37 respondents. This support was explicit in many responses ("The system works well," "The system is fundamentally sound," Course to course is "more useful."), and was also interpreted as being clearly intended in the responses "No" to block transfer and "Supplement, do not replace." All university-related respondents expressed satisfaction with the current system, and all but two institutional responses from non-universities were supportive of the current system. A letter signed jointly by the chairs of TUPC and the CCEO referred to "the excellent course transfer credit system jointly developed and governed by the colleges, institutes and universities."

This was not unconditional support, since many of these respondents also indicated interest in improvements to the transfer system, but it is certainly a clear message that the majority of respondents believe that our course-to-course transfer system is essentially sound, and should not be abandoned.

Three or four respondents stated that they do not perceive the current system to be particularly restrictive, time-consuming or costly. An equal number were clear also that lack of support for block transfer did not equate with lack of support for transfer in general, while others pointed out that because of the nature of arts and sciences, course to course transfer would still happen anyway. A few seminar participants and one

respondent commented on how much better the transfer system in BC is than in other provinces.

## **2. FREQUENT THEMES**

### **The current system is not serving students well**

Eight formal responses indicated that the current system of course-to-course transfer is not serving students as well as it should. Two of those responses came from large groups representing college faculty (CIEA) and students (CFS). Responses were of two kinds: system perspectives, and expressions of frustration.

The response from CIEA, although it did not indicate that the current system was unworkable, pointed to the growing complexity of the system and the problems this has caused and continues to cause for students (although their analysis of problems focused more on faculty). The CFS response outlines the difficulties faced by “a significant number of students.” They state, “There is little doubt that many students find themselves in a position of not receiving full transfer from a receiving institution. In cases where this interferes with a student’s timely completion of studies, ability to afford an extra semester to obtain additional credit, etc., the effect can range from a longer period of study to a student not completing a degree.” Two university colleges, although they did not agree the system was broken, perceived that part time students had a more difficult time navigating the transfer system. System perspective comments from two individuals pointed to the cost to the students and the system of “wasted” or duplicate learning, and one university college referred to the “waste” of scarce faculty and staff resources in time spent negotiating transfer credit. One commentator reminded us that the system works well only as long as the student has established program and institution intentions, and understands how to plan carefully for transfer.

In addition to formal responses to the paper, expressions of frustration were heard from students who participated in a transfer seminar: “Transfer is a hassle.” “I had to read the same text over.” “I couldn’t get into my courses because of delays in the transfer process.” One counselor referred to the “current inane course to course transfer system” and one university college faculty member alleged that “universities have little interest in our transferring students and in our transfer problems.” A department head from a small college claimed that “The transfer policies of universities discriminate against our students by location of residence.” One college felt that there was “an underlying assumption throughout the [discussion] paper that the current system is working well” but that in fact there was much anecdotal evidence of problems, and widespread perceptions of problems.

### **A Learning Outcomes approach is compatible with other models**

Ten representative responses, of which nine were college/university college/institute related and one was university related, pointed out that Learning Outcomes is an approach to curriculum design and assessment which can be used to enhance articulation but is not necessarily a vehicle for transfer. "Although [the learning outcomes approach] may resolve some transfer problems, through clearer statements of course objectives, it will not, in and of itself, resolve the different educational perspectives from which such difficulties arise. To propose learning outcomes as a block transfer "solution" seems to take away from its more useful purpose as a means towards improving curriculum and program development" (CUFA). CIEA proposed that the articulation of curriculum be conducted through an outcomes approach "or other similar neutral format" as long as the process involved articulation committees.

An intriguing response on this topic came from the CCTT. It reinforced that as an approach to curriculum, learning outcomes "is compatible with course-by-course transfer, system wide transfer or block transfer. It is not just a way of doing transfer." However, it went on to say that a whole new transfer paradigm was possible, based on a learning outcomes approach, which may well serve to eliminate many of the limitations and frustrations of current course by course transfer. Such a paradigm may be a better approach to reengineering the transfer system than a system involving block transfer.

Several respondents (NIC, Selkirk, COTR, Deans, SIOC, CFS, UNBC, OUC Deans' Council) expressed support for the general principles of a learning outcomes model, while cautioning against its imposition, its applicability to all disciplines, or its viability as a short term solution. They felt that "institutional experience with such a model is still limited"(Selkirk), and that it was best viewed as an "evolutionary approach...[which] allows sending institutions maximum flexibility in organizing offerings and in designing curriculum" (COTR).

It is also important to note here that two university responses (SFU, UVic) referred to opposition at their institution to a learning outcomes model, while a university college (OUC) referred to the "radical and difficult change" this approach would involve.

### **Articulation committees perform a valuable function**

Ten respondents referred specifically to the high value placed on the articulation process within the current transfer system, and especially on the collegial relationships and the trust that articulation committees can build when they are functioning well. One university professor stated, " ... [a] better approach is to adapt informally over time through annual articulation meetings." Another university department suggested that articulation committees need to be supported. An articulation committee chair stated that, "The trust created within the articulation 'community' allows for smoother transfer

credit and honours the uniqueness of each program, while at the same time allowing learners to receive the credit they deserve.”

Articulation committees can represent faculty control over curriculum (as opposed to administrator, ministry or student control), and support for articulation committees was also expressed in terms of this control. These respondents were for the most part supportive of change, as long as the need for that change was recognized by articulation committees, and involved them. “Provided that instructors and articulation committees control the process,” said one college, “a movement towards outcomes based articulation will benefit the post-secondary system in BC.” The CIEA response referred to faculty remaining “central to the development of change, through their participation on Provincial Articulation Committees.”

However, two respondents pointed out that it is important to remember that articulation committees have no powers.

### **There are dangers or disadvantages to block transfer**

Eleven respondents sounded alarms that systems of block transfer could in fact result in less flexibility, and “force students to make decisions too early” (SIOC). Six of these respondents warned of the danger of creating false expectations, and gave examples. False expectations can occur when students assume that a block transfer entitles them to admission to the institution or program of their choice, ensures they have fulfilled all prerequisites, and guarantees that they are well prepared for upper division courses. One university response referred to the “dire consequences” of switching majors in a block transfer system. Another worried that block transfer would negatively affect the ability of his department to safeguard student success in upper level courses by eliminating “our ability to monitor the content and quality of courses offered elsewhere.” One small college was concerned that, since second year offerings were limited “students might feel unable to start at a small institution if they know they can’t get their major requirements for the first two years [there].”

Respondents from *all* sectors told us to BE CAREFUL. In particular, student participants in a CFS seminar requested that we not abandon the old system until we were absolutely sure we had a quantitatively better one to put in its place. These same students wondered if “only certain courses would get into the curriculum once you start standardizing,” resulting in less choice and diversity in course offerings at colleges. Their concerns were echoed in the official CFS response.

### **A differentiated system is desirable**

Receiving institutions (universities, university colleges and institutes) were more likely than other respondents to refer specifically to the benefits of a differentiated system.

Nine responses relate to this theme, all but two representative of receiving institutions. One individual commentator asserted, "British Columbia is best served by having a highly differentiated degree-granting system." (Mullins) This is echoed in two university responses: "Any policy should support the differentiated system," (TUPC) and "Block transfer would, in our opinion, flatten the diversities and inhibit, perhaps fatally, the opportunities that such diversities promote." (Uvic Theatre Dept.) The CAAE response highlights the "special nature" of provincial institutes such as BCIT and ECIAD and the need to uphold "principles of local decision making" to preserve the uniqueness of their programs. It is hardly surprising that three university colleges are among the respondents in this category. As one stated, "There is tension between the concept of block transfer and the expectation that institutions, such as Malaspina, will develop unique degree programs."

At the same time, three responses from system-wide groups pointed to differentiation as the source of transfer difficulties. Two emphasized the "dramatic expansion" of the system as adding greatly to the complexity of transfer (CCTT, CIEA). The CFS response while acknowledging that unique courses are a desirable feature of institutions, accused the current transfer system of a failure to "accommodate that diversity."

### **3. MINOR THEMES**

#### **Block transfer is not appropriate for all programs**

Respondents in this group considered that block transfer, while "valid ... and appropriate" for professional programs, was much more problematic for arts and sciences. Some expressed the opinion that "a degree is more than the sum of its parts" and that specialization, which is justified and necessary at all levels, makes block transfer inappropriate for arts and science degrees.

There appears, however, to be support across the sectors for the block transfer of applied and professional programs. Seven respondents referred specifically to the appropriateness of block transfer for professional programs, a principle that should be "commended but not copied for the general arts and science programs" (TUPC). Of these respondents, three stated that block transfer arrangements for applied and professional programs should be "encouraged" and expanded. However, three others pointed out (and this was reinforced orally at a meeting of the Deans of Social and Health Sciences) that a process designed to elicit responses about arts and sciences should not result in a directive to professional programs. One institutional response stated that any further expansion of applied/professional block transfer merited a separate discussion paper and consultation process.

#### **Block transfer is the wrong goal/we are asking the wrong question**

Seven responses related to this theme. While respondents appreciated the opportunity to engage in debate about our transfer system, they felt that to focus on the mechanics of transfer (course-to-course Vs block transfer) was to beg the question, or to avoid the deeper issues. “Rather than look at the technical problems of transfer, it is more important that we address the underlying questions of how our programs and institutions relate to each other, and what the real goals are for the system.” (Deans of Academic and Career Programs) CUFA felt that discussion to date had “focused on process, to the exclusion of academic content and context.” The maturity of the system, the CCTT paper argues, should persuade us to “abandon the micro-management of transfer credits” in favour of real debate about the outcomes of the curriculum. The TUPC and the CFS responses suggest that the real goal for the transfer system is full transfer, not block transfer, while BCIT proposed that it would be more useful to focus on the criteria for forging transfer agreements. Finally, one observer commented that the real focus should be on the learner and what is to be learned, rather than on “instructional delivery” and goes on to suggest wording for a new system transfer goal, based on the assessment of learning (Morin).

### **Clearer definitions are needed**

A suggested redefinition of transfer to focus on the learner was mentioned above. One college commented on the need to define such terms as “system” and “partner” as they are understood in BC post-secondary education. A college department head identified the fuzziness of terms such as upper and lower level. A college objected to the definition given for block transfer, pointing out that both sending and receiving institutions should be recognized as assessors of “academic wholeness and integrity.” The PLA Steering Committee objected to the use of the term “second order transfer credit” which they interpreted to have disparaging connotations.

### **Flexibility is essential**

Whatever we do, it must result in more flexibility for students, not less. This theme is perhaps implicit in the number of votes received by the “supplement rather than replace” option. However, six specific comments were also received that a system of block transfer where appropriate alongside course by course transfer might result in optimal flexibility. “No single system or model can accommodate all situations.” (Gallagher) “For [small colleges] the best of both worlds would be to have a block transfer arrangement for the associate degree ... as well as maintaining the course-by-course system of credit transfer. This ... would give our students the greatest flexibility.” (NLC) UCFV opted for a “mixed model” approach, in the interests of greatest flexibility. COTR spoke for all small colleges when it pointed out that their students will still need to be able to transfer on a course by course basis, because of the limited course offerings available. One respondent posited a mixed approach of course by course transfer for the major, and block transfer for general education requirements. (Mullins)

### **Where's the evidence that change is needed?**

Two written responses questioned the impetus for block transfer, asking what evidence exists that significant numbers of transfer students experience problems, to justify "such a radical revision." This response came up several times in seminar discussions.

## **C. UNDERLYING ISSUES**

In addition to the themes, it was possible to discern in responses a number of underlying issues or tensions. Many respondents based their arguments explicitly or implicitly on clear positions, or premises. Others sidestepped the questions in favour of philosophical analyses of these issues. A review of these underlying issues has been provided since it would clearly not do justice to the responses to ignore them, and since they provide insight into the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the academic, institutional and systemic context in which responses are forged, and into which any changes in the transfer system will have to fit.

### **Autonomy versus constraint: curriculum and the role of faculty**

Underlying many responses was the issue of the alienation of some college faculty who feel that their role as partners in the design, delivery and assessment of learning is significantly constrained by the current structure of the transfer system. This was expressed in the CIEA response which stated, "Faculty members' ability to design and develop innovative, responsive curriculum is hampered by the need to match the conflicting requirements or expectations of the receiving institutions. Currently, the ultimate criterion for the value of a course is its transferability - not its ability to meet students' needs." And "Faculty members' autonomy in the design of curriculum is subsumed by the power of the universities within the present hierarchical structure." The CCTT response also eloquently presents this view when it states, "The current system fails to utilize considerable expertise available at the college level for curricular innovation. If the colleges are to respond to the changing needs of students...they must be freed from the constraints of course-by-course articulation that is often driven by agendas germane to the universities and disciplines rather than the broad needs of college students."

On the other end of the spectrum are faculty at universities, and now also at the new receiving institutions: the university colleges and the provincial institutes. They are concerned that a block transfer system would result in loss of control of their own curriculum. "We would be reluctant to accept any system that eliminates our ability to monitor the content or quality of courses delivered elsewhere." (SFU dept.) Even more bluntly, "We would reject the loss of the right to independently assess the quality of...courses offered at sending institutions since, in our experience, frequently there have

been concerns about the appropriateness of lower level transfer courses as preparation for the...major.” (UBC dept.) The imposition of block transfer would in the opinion of one university college mean “imposing changes to the curriculum developed by faculty at the institution... [which] violates the fundamental principle of degree program autonomy” (OUC). The provincial institutes cite the unique requirements of their programs as necessitating careful monitoring of learning acquired elsewhere. (CAAE)

The desire for professional autonomy and curricular control is common to all faculty. However, it appears that a faculty member’s location in either a sending or a receiving institution may influence his/her response to issues of transfer. Is this a stalemate, or can we find ways to honour the desire of faculty at both sending and receiving institutions to respond to the needs of their students and to their disciplinary imperatives?

### **Institutional autonomy versus system issues**

Most respondents who commented on the question of institutional autonomy did so in support of it, and agreed that the interests of BC were best served by a highly differentiated system. It is this diversity which has created the ability of institutions to develop unique and innovative programs and which afford students optimum choice of degree opportunities.

There is, however, significant tension between the autonomy enjoyed by each of our public post-secondary institutions and what many observers view as an increased “centralizing” tendency evidenced in the Strategic Plan. One commentator referred to the voluntary implementation of forms of block transfer as “giving priority to the needs of students and society and to a corresponding reduction of a misplaced emphasis on ‘institutional autonomy’ ” (Gallagher).

It is the matter of institutional autonomy and diversity that creates perhaps the biggest practical problem in transfer: “The biggest difficulty present in the current system of transfer is that in many areas the large receiving institutions do not agree on the required content of some of the courses students must take in first and second year.” (Douglas College) See also comments under “A differentiated system is desirable” on p.12.

Transfer policy is one area where issues of system and issues of autonomy intersect. Respondents are asking how we balance the two, in the interests of B. C. students.

### **Focus on discipline/faculty versus focus on the learner**

Two quotes illustrate diametrically opposed views related to this theme. “Providing credit for transfer students is important for student access, but must not supersede the necessary role of faculty in developing curriculum and defining academic outcomes” (OUC). “Probably the most significant tension is between the focus on teaching and instructional delivery and the focus on learning. Transfer arrangements in BC have focused on the former.” (Morin)

*Charting a New Course* emphasized a learner centred approach to post-secondary education in BC through a host of new and ongoing initiatives. However, faculty have traditionally defended their professional autonomy and their right to teach their curriculum according to their disciplinary foundations. Some faculty see block transfer as compromising their “rights” in this regard.

### **The evolution of the new receiving institutions**

Since the first edition of the provincial transfer guide for 1990/91 we have gone from 23 public post-secondary institutions in BC, of which 4 could grant their own degree, to 28, of which 14 can grant their own degrees. This has resulted in a shift of perspective from the majority of institutions viewing themselves as primarily sending institutions, to only half now doing so. For the remaining colleges the question may be: Will this shift in focus serve to increase the complexity of transfer and fractionate pre-majors even further, or will the new institutions remember their roots and be sensitive to the needs of transfer students? For the emerging degree granting institutions the challenge is to identify market niches, and devise unique degree programs which build on the strengths of their faculty, and address the economic and social environment in which they operate. Trying to accommodate transfer students at the same time adds to the intricacy of their task. This undercurrent was discernible in the comments of some of the university colleges and provincial institutes who responded. Also clear was the anxiety of the smaller rural colleges that their ability to prepare students well for transfer not be compromised by the increasing complexity of the system, and that their role in the system not be marginalized.

## THE OCTOBER FORUM

The opportunity for a different type of debate, involving interchange between representatives (mostly faculty) of most post-secondary institutions and organizations, was afforded by the Block Transfer Forum. By this stage most people had read and reflected on the discussion paper, and some had been involved in formulating their institutional response. Sending and receiving institutions were equally represented, due to the selection process, which was largely handed over to articulation committee chairs. The purpose of the Forum was for participants to evaluate and comment on the responses received to date, and to make recommendations regarding next steps, as well as to finalize the consultation phase of the block transfer project.

After two presentations, participants were divided into six breakout groups and asked to respond to a number of questions. The following description of those responses has been reconstructed from notes kept by group facilitators.

### RESPONSES FROM DISCUSSION GROUPS

#### **Q1. Do you agree that the current system is fundamentally sound?**

Although in the main participants indicated that they felt the current transfer system was fundamentally sound, a minority in almost every group disagreed. There was a high degree of consensus, however, that improvements were needed. The complexity of the system was cited as a problem, but the 'up' side of our highly differentiated system - diversity of degree options for students - was also acknowledged. The current system may restrict innovation. Improvements are needed most in information and communication flow, in cutting down on rules and regulations, and in adjusting the power imbalances inherent in current articulation processes. In addition, we need to continue research into student transfer problems. Issues and problems with the transfer system *are* substantial, but it is still "the best in Canada."

#### **Q2. Do you agree that the development of block transfer arrangements should be a priority for the post-secondary system?**

Participants were fairly widely distributed in their answers to this question, with responses averaging out as "Yes, but perhaps not a top priority." Some were reluctant to commit in the absence of one or two clear models, and in the absence of any proof that block transfer will indeed improve things for students. Others pointed out that block transfer will not fix the "prerequisite problem." Most groups appear to have had minority expressions at both ends of the opinion spectrum; block transfer should be a high priority Vs block transfer should not be a priority at all. However, most participants appeared to feel that block transfer had the potential to effect improvements, both for students and for articulation relationships for faculty, and as such deserved further exploration and development.

**Q3. Do you agree that any model or models should supplement, not replace, our current course-by-course transfer system?**

Although there was a clear minority opinion that the current system needs to be replaced, the majority of participants felt strongly that any block transfer models we develop should be viewed as supplemental to our current course by course system. The current system will have to be retained anyway, since many students transfer with small numbers of credits.

**Q4. Models 4 (Flexible Pre-Major), 5 (Learning Outcomes) and 6 (Descriptive Pathways) appear to have most appeal to respondents. Examining each one, please tell us:**

- **Is it acceptable to both the sending and receiving sectors, or perhaps department or disciplines within those sectors?**
- **Is it feasible to implement?**
- **Does it represent an intersection of interest for all sectors?**

Discussion of the models appears to have been wide ranging, and is difficult to summarize from the notes. It was confirmed that these three models appeal to various people and sectors. Each has its champions.

- Model 4, Flexible Pre-Major was cited most often as having the potential to fulfill all the requisites suggested by the question.
- Model 6, Descriptive Pathways: we should be doing this anyway, rather than look at it as a block transfer project
- Model 5, Learning Outcomes, has great potential in the longer term. Has strong adherents but also skeptics. Is already successfully used in the system in some contexts (e.g. ECIAD).

**Q5. Can we reject models 1, 2 and 3 at this point or do they merit further consideration?**

There appeared to be reluctance to let go of any model irrevocably. Rather we were advised to keep them all on the back burner. Several participants expressed an idealistic hope that Model 1, System Wide Transfer, could be a long term goal for the system.

## **ADVICE FROM THE AFTERNOON SESSION**

The afternoon of the Forum was devoted to one question: **Please give us your best advice on how to implement improvements to transfer in BC. Provide four specific recommendations.**

Four key areas emerged from these deliberations.

### **Communication**

Concern with improving communication in the system was evident in the comments of every group. Students need better access to information, as well as clearly defined appeals and arbitration processes for transfer disputes. Institutions could pay more attention to collaborative planning and to exchanging information about new programs, and especially about changes to existing courses and programs which may affect credit transfer.

### **Flexibility**

The theme of flexibility emerged from the comments of almost every group in one way or another. All institutions were encouraged to be more flexible in their acceptance of courses, and it was suggested that acceptance by one of UBC, SFU, UNBC or UVic be the criteria for acceptance of any course for credit at all public institutions in B.C. Two groups suggested devising a set of flexible criteria to guide the assessment of transferability (such as the criteria outlined in the previous sentence). Others suggested continuing to incorporate learning outcomes into our approaches to transfer. A move towards system wide transfer as a general long term goal was suggested by others.

### **Associate Degree**

Clear interest in the associate degree as a vehicle for transfer emerged from three of the morning groups, and this theme was reinforced in the afternoon. The associate degree was seen as a “natural block”. Block transfer of the associate degree would enable students to stay longer at college. This expression of interest may have been encouraged by the announcement that morning that UNBC was granting block transfer to holders of associate degrees.

### **Articulation Committees**

Articulation committees must maintain a central role in any changes involving the transfer and articulation of post-secondary courses and programs. This had already been underscored by the written responses we received to the block transfer discussion paper. The afternoon discussion groups provided additional rationale, and also concrete suggestions for supporting articulation committees to expand their role. Many of these suggestions involved the allocation of resources, challenging the Ministry, institutions and BCCAT to find ways to find those resources.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Responses to the block transfer discussion paper and the input of participants in the block transfer forum indicates that there is definite interest within the post-secondary community in improvements to the current system which will result in smoother transitions for students and increased flexibility for college faculty. There is also strong support among post secondary educators of all sectors in British Columbia for our current transfer system, and for the articulation processes upon which it is constructed.

The block transfer models outlined in the discussion paper can be viewed as incremental improvements to the current course to course system or as radical changes to it. For example, Model 6 involves communication and descriptive work, but probably has no curricular implications. As such it is most acceptable to those who are currently satisfied with the system, or who are now in a position of devising unique new degree programs: the traditional and emerging receiving institutions. Model 1, System Wide Transfer, appears to imply a fundamental shift in the relative power of receiving and sending institutions, and therefore has most appeal to organizations representing those who feel they have had to adapt most over the years to fit into the current system: students and college faculty. Model 5, Learning Outcomes, has been the most controversial model, eliciting both support and opposition. This may suggest that more time is needed to build system-wide familiarity with the concepts of Learning Outcomes, or it may suggest a fundamental bipolarity of attitudes towards this model of curricular design. At any rate, many respondents pointed out that learning outcomes can be incorporated into course outlines, and at the very least may ease articulation through the establishment of clearer descriptions of what students will know.

Model 4, Flexible Pre-Major, appears to come closest to representing an intersection of interests between sending and receiving institutions while at the same time offering real flexibility for students and for college faculty. A pre-major "block" can be as flexible or as multi-lateral as the nature of the discipline or the will of the negotiators allows. For example, for some disciplines it may be possible to construct a "B.C. Pre-Major Program." Once a set of flexible curricular elements is determined, the program could be identified on transcripts (e.g. "completion of Psychology Block") and accepted at face value by all receiving institutions where it would confer eligibility to apply for third year admission with no necessity to complete further lower level prerequisites. Thus, it would fit the definition of block transfer as given in the Discussion Paper. On the other hand, establishment of pre-major blocks could become a matter of bilateral agreements between institutions, resulting in close advising of students but no notations on transcripts. Assessments of credits would be on a course by course basis, but as long as the student had fulfilled the terms of the agreement, he/she would be eligible to apply for third year admission to the program. This type of transfer arrangement is easier to view as a refinement to the current transfer system rather than a fundamentally different way of negotiating transfer agreements. In both of these scenarios, students who transfer with less than full blocks would revert to course by course assessment. And we must not forget that most transfer students transfer with considerably less than two years of credit.

Whether we label the ideas contained in the Block Transfer Discussion Paper as “Block Transfer” or as “Improvements to Transfer” they have provided a platform for thoughtful and constructive deliberation about how our transfer system can best serve the needs of the students who study and the faculty who teach in arts and sciences in B.C. colleges and universities. What has emerged is a clear willingness to explore further some of the options outlined in the discussion paper.

Willingness to explore block transfer options is conditional upon any changes:

- resulting in real improvement and greater flexibility
- supplementing our current system, not replacing it
- being voluntary
- involving faculty
- not compromising institutional autonomy or a differentiated system.

There is, conditional on the above caveats, most interest in:

- **Model 6, Descriptive Pathways**
- **Model 4, Flexible Pre-Major**
- **and Model 5, Learning Outcomes** (however, model 5 is likely to be a long term or evolutionary process, and will aid articulation through clear course objectives, rather than be a direct vehicle for transfer)
- **setting as a long term goal, the principles of Model 1, System Wide Transfer**
- exploring further the feasibility of utilizing the **associate degree** as a vehicle for block transfer.

## APPENDIX A - LIST OF RESPONDENTS

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Responses received from:

<b>Universities</b>	<b>14</b>
Official university response	5 UBC, SFU, UVic(2), UNBC
Departmental	5 Uvic Theatre, Biology & French, UBC Psychology & Sociology
Individual	1 Dow (SFU)
Representative	2 TUPC/VPAC, CUFA
Anonymous	1 UVic
<b>University Colleges</b>	<b>9</b>
Official	5 UCFV, KUC, MUC, UCC, OUC
Departmental	1 MUC Advisory
Representative	2 OUCFA, OUC Deans
Individual	1 Penner (MUC)
<b>Colleges</b>	<b>11</b>
Official	7 Douglas, Langara, VCC, North Island, Northern Lights, CNC, Selkirk
Departmental	2 CotR University Studies, CotR Business
Individual	2 Heinemann (NWCC), Beaveridge (Cam)
<b>Institutes</b>	<b>4</b>
Official	2 BCIT, ECIAD
Representative	1 CAAE
Individual	1 Gibbs (BCIT)
<b>System Wide Organizations</b>	<b>3</b>
Official/Committee	3 CFS, PLA Steering Ctte, TUPC/CCEO
<b>College/Institute/ University- College/Agency</b>	<b>6</b>
Representative	3 SIOC, Deans, CIEA
Committees	2 Articulation Committees
Centre	1 Centre for C, T & T
<b>Independent Observers</b>	<b>4</b>
Individuals	4 Gallagher, Morin, Mullins, Schwalm(ASU)

Total Responses: **51**

Included in analysis: **48** (Minus: anonymous, Individual from Camosun, and Schwalm)

## **APPENDIX B - RESPONDENTS CORRESPONDING TO QUESTIONS**

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**QUESTION: Should we develop a block transfer system for arts and science degrees in BC?**

**ANSWER:**

**Stated as yes - 12**

College Institute Educators' Association (CIEA), College of New Caledonia (CNC), College of the Rockies (CotR) university studies, Langara (LC), Northern Lights (NLC), Selkirk (SC), University College of the Cariboo (UCC), Confederation of University Faculty Associations (CUFA), Paul Gallagher, Gibbs, Penner, Adult Education Articulation Committee

**Clearly intended as yes - 3**

CotR Business, Kwantlen University College (KUC), North Island College (NIC)

**Stated as yes with "provided that" - 5**

Senior Instructional Officers Committee (SIOC), Deans & Directors of Academic and Career/Technical (Deans), Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design (ECIAD), University of Northern BC (UNBC)

**Clearly intended as yes with "provided that" - 2**

University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV), Lloyd Morin

**Maybe - 4**

Centre for Curriculum, Transfer & Technology (C2T2), Coalition for the Advancement of Applied Education (CAAE), BC Institute of Technology (BCIT), University of BC (UBC)- using Associate Degrees

**No - 5**

Okanagan University College Faculty Association (OUCFA), UBC Psychology, University of Victoria (UVic) Senate Admissions Committee, UVic Theatre, UVic French

**No, but as improvements to the current system, then "yes" - 8**

Heineman, Malaspina University College (MUC) Advising, OUC Deans, OUC, the University Presidents' Council (TUPC) and Vice Presidents Academic Committee (VPAC), Simon Fraser University (SFU), Dow, MUC.

**QUESTION: Should block transfer supplement or replace our current course to course transfer system?**

**ANSWER:**

**Supplement - 23**

SIOC, Deans, CFS, CNC, CotR University Studies, LC, NIC, NLC, Douglas (DC), UCC, UCFV, CUFA, Kemple, UNBC, Gallagher, Adult Education Art. Ctte., CAAE, UBC, UVic, Mullins.

**Supplement "as improvement to current system" - 3**

OUC Deans, OUC, SFU.

**Replace - 3**

CIEA (eventual goal), KUC, Gibbs

**Hard to decide - 1**

Selkirk

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**QUESTION: Do you support Model 1 - System-wide Transfer?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 5**

CIEA, CFS, CotR University Studies, CotR Business, Douglas (dept.)

**Yes, in principle - 6**

Deans, MUC, OUC Deans (?), UNBC, Gallagher, Morin

**No - 3**

CUFA, SFU, UVic Biology

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**QUESTION: Do you support Model 2 - General Education Core Curriculum?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 6**

C2T2, Gibbs, 2 Douglas College departments, Kemple, UVic VP

**No - 4**

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CFS, CUFA, SFU, UNBC (BA General only)

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**QUESTION: Do you support Model 3 - Standardized Pre-Major Curriculum?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 3**

NLC, Penner, UNBC (for first year only)

**No - 1**

SFU

**Maybe - 1**

CFS

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**QUESTION: Do you support Model 4 - Flexible Pre-Major?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 15**

SIOC, Deans, CFS, CNC, NIC, NLC, Selkirk, 2 Douglas departments, OUC Deans, OUC, SFU, Kemple, UNBC, Morin

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**QUESTION: Do you support Model 5 - Learning Outcomes?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 5**

C2T2, CIEA, ECIAD, KUC, Morin

**Yes, but as evolutionary/longer term - 7**

SIOC, Deans, CFS, CNC, CotR University Studies, NIC, UNBC.

**No - 7**

Selkirk, Douglas, OUC Deans, UVic, CUFA, SFU, UVic Biology

**QUESTION: Do you support Model 6 - Descriptive Pathways?**

**ANSWER:**

**Yes - 15**

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CAAE (conditional), ECIAD, Langara, NIC, NLC, Heinemann, 2 Douglas departments, OUC Deans, OUC, Dow, UVic Vice President, UVic Biology, UNBC, Morin.

**Yes, do it anyway - 4**

SIOC, Deans, CUFA, SFU

**No - 1**

CFS

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#### **OTHER COMMENTS/MODELS**

**Associate Degree - 2**

TUPC/VPAC, and UBC

**Course by course for major, block for general ed. - 1**

Mullins

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**QUESTION: Should block transfer be implemented through legislation or only through voluntary agreement by participating institutions?**

**ANSWER:**

**No/never - 16**

SIOC, Deans, ECIAD, CNC, Langara, NIC, Douglas, OUC Deans, OUC, TUPC/VPAC, CUFA, Kemple, UVic VP. UNBC, Gallagher, Morin

**As a last resort, try everything else first - 6**

CIEA, CFS, CotR university studies, NLC, KUC (?), Early Childhood Educators (ECE)

**Yes - 2**

Gibbs, Penner



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